NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

SAMUEL GOMPERS TO FREDERICK ENGELS: A LETTER

By PHILIP S. FONER

In the Letter-Books of Samuel Gompers, originally housed in the American Federation of Labor in Washington, D. C. and recently transferred to the Library of Congress, there is a copy of a letter Gompers sent to Frederick Engels. None of the collections of Engels' correspondence, including the vast collection at the Institute of Marxism-Leninism in Moscow, have the original.

In this letter, Gompers addresses himself to the question of whether a political party, in this case the American Section of the Socialist Labor Party (S.L.P.), could be entitled to representation in a central labor union affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. He ruled negatively and was sustained, by a vote of 1,574 to 496, at the 1890 A.F.L. convention, meeting in Detroit. When the S.L.P., at Daniel De Leon's insistence, began circulating reports throughout Europe that this convention had condemned the principles of Socialism, Gompers decided to clarify the issue by writing to prominent European Socialists. Of the several letters which he wrote, the most important by far was that addressed to Frederick Engels on January 9, 1891.

While Engels never replied directly, he made his position clear in a letter to Hermann Schlüter, an editor of the *New Yorker Volkszeitung*. "Nor do I understand the quarrel with Gompers," Engels wrote on January 29, 1891. "His Federation is, as far as I know, an association of trade-unions and nothing but trade-unions. Hence they have the *formal right* to reject anyone coming in as the representative of a labor organization that is *not* a trade-union, or to reject delegates of an association to which such organizations are admitted. I cannot judge from here, of course, whether it was *propagandistically* advisable to expose oneself to such a rejection. But it was beyond question that it had to come, and I, for one, cannot blame Gompers for it." (Karl Marx and

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Frederick Engels, *Letters to Americans, 1848-1895,* New York: 1953, 233-34.)

Jan. 9th. 1891

Mr. Fred Engels
#122 Regents Park Road
London (N.W.) Eng.

Dear Sir:—I make so free as to write to you upon a question which I know you take a deep interest in, and from the further fact of having been a life-long devoted friend, thinker and writer to and for the labor movement.

You have no doubt received reports of the proceedings of the convention of the American Federation of Labor held at Detroit, Mich. Dec. 8th-13th, 1890, but from what I know and see printed in some papers I am led to believe that little if anything but a garbled, untrue yes, maliciously false report has reached you. Having respect for you and confidence in your judgment I desire as briefly as possible to recount the facts as they exist.

The American Federation of Labor is as its title implies a federation of Trade Unions, the constitution providing for "the encouragement and formation of local Trade and Labor Unions, and the closer federation of such societies through the organization of Central Trades and Labor Unions in every city, and the further combination of such bodies into State, territorial or Provincial organizations, to secure legislation in the interests of the working masses.

The establishment of National and International Trade Unions, based upon a strict recognition of the autonomy of each trade, and the promotion and advancement of such bodies.

An American Federation of all National and International Trade Unions, to aid and assist each other; and furthermore, to secure National Legislation in the interest of the working people, and influence public opinion, by peaceful and legal methods, in favor of organized labor.

To aid and encourage the labor press of America."

By constitutional provisions we have endeavored to also make the Federation more of a concerted effort on the part of the members of the various other trade unions when the members of any particular one

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shall be in any conflict with their employers, in other words, to endeavor to carry on in practice the idea, "one for all, and all for one."

I speak thus fully of the constitutional provisions and the purpose of the American Federation of Labor in order that you may have a full and clear understanding of the formation of our organization, which unquestionably must have a bearing on forming a judgment upon the question at issue.

It is also necessary to add that the American Federation of Labor issues through its President what is termed certificates of affiliation or charters, these documents certifying to the fact of the fellowship of the National or International Trade Unions, or Central Labor Unions, or Trade Councils.

We have a very large number of Central Labor Unions of a local character throughout this country, in fact in almost every industrial centre. In the city of New York such an organization existed under the title of the Central Labor Union, but owing to a local quarrel a division took place, and the local Trade Unions formed what was termed the Central Labor Federation of N. Y. They applied for a charter to this office and I cheerfully granted it to them believing that they were honest, and well intentioned towards the labor movement. Together with others I urged on a reconciliation between the divided factions, which was accomplished, the Central Labor Federation having resolved to adjourn, and surrender its charter to this office. I have a letter from its Secretary stating that fact.

This union did not bring about harmony, and without going over the entire grounds as to the cause and how it was brought about let me say that most of the organizations formerly constituting the Central Labor Federation again organized a Central Labor Federation. They wanted the old charter returned which of course could not be complied with. They appealed from my decision, and I was sustained in that position.

They then applied for a new charter. It is now necessary to call your attention to the fact that pending the correspondence between the Secretary of the Central Labor Federation and myself, the American Section of the Socialist Labor Party of New York sent delegates and was represented by the Central Labor Federation. The Secretary of the Central Labor Federation in forwarding the application for a charter accompanied it, as is the custom, with a list of organizations represented therein. Among the organizations represented was the American

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Section of the Socialist Labor Party. I called attention to the fact that the American Federation of Labor was a federation of Trade Unions and expressed the opinion that the Socialist Labor Party or a section of it, as a party, could not properly be represented in a Trade Union central organization.

Of course this did not suit the views of the leaders of the Socialist Labor Party and they commenced to abuse me both officially and personally. Desiring to avoid conflict as much as possible, I referred the entire subject matter to the convention of the American Federation of Labor which was then but a few months off. At the convention every opportunity was given their representatives and those who held their views, as well as all others, to express themselves fully and freely upon the subject. One whole day and a half was consumed in its consideration and finally the decision not to grant a charter to the Central Labor Federation, so long as they have the Socialist Labor Party, as a party, represented therein, was adopted by a vote of 1574 to 496.

I am free to say that in the discussion of the subject I took decided grounds that the Trade Unions were the natural organizations of the wage-workers; that as a federation of Trade Unions the condition necessary to representation in a convention of Trade Unions is a good standing membership in a Trade Union. This is the kernel of the whole dispute, and upon which I am willing to abide.

There has never yet arisen a question in our Councils whether a man was a socialist or not, whether he was an anarchist or not, in fact the greatest freedom and latitude of thought have been not only permitted but encouraged. Some of our best men and staunchest in holding as I do are well-known and avowed socialists.

I refer you to the documents I mail to your address with this as an evidence of the intelligence and progressive character of our movement. I regret that the proceedings of the Detroit convention are not yet printed, but I shall forward you a copy as soon as they are received from the printer.

Our movement is anxiously endeavoring to keep in touch with the wage-workers, to help organize them, to make them self-reliant, to coalesce them into one grand whole struggling against the unjust conditions that exist, and to supplant them with such that the noblest aspirations of mankind has conceived or can conceive.

Pardon me if I intrude a little personal matter in this communication. They have accused me of being unfair and partial while presiding.

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I beg to assure you that if my experience of twenty-five years in the labor movement presiding in the majority of its most important gatherings would not teach me that an unfair presiding officer in a labor organization always accomplished the very reverse of the tendencies of his unfair rulings, I certainly would be a dunce. So characteristic of impartiality is my reputation while presiding, that during a joint debate between Sergius Schevitch and Henry George, I was the only one that both could agree upon, regardless of the well known fact that my views coincided with those of Schevitch as opposed to George.

I ask your pardon for intruding this lengthy letter upon you, yes in fact this subject, but I do so because as I have said I have respect for your judgment, and as a student of your writings and those of Marx and others in the same line, I would not have your judgment formed upon the basis of erroneous information.

If it is not asking too much, and you can find the time, I kindly request that you favor me in the interest of your great cause, with an expression of opinion upon the above at your earliest convenience and oblige.

Yours very respectfully,
Samuel Gompers

N.B. I enclose herein a copy of the committee which was appointed at the Detroit convention and which was finally adopted by the vote above referred to.

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